



*Rowland Evans and Robert Novak*



# Turning Back the Reforms

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THE RUTHLESS speed with which Jean Westwood's erstwhile fearless defenders dropped her fading efforts to remain Democratic national chairman and started pushing George Mitchell to replace her shows dramatically that far more than personalities are at stake in the deepening struggle for party power.

Mrs. Westwood's principal supporters abandoned her when her support dwindled for one reason: they were always far less interested in her personally than in maintaining and extending McGovern's Commission reform. Mitchell, 39-year-old national committeeman from Maine, is viewed by these reformers as a pro-reform Democrat acceptable to Mrs. Westwood's enemies. Now, however, anti-Westwood Democrats are sniping at the Mitchell trial balloon for the very reason that Mrs. Westwood's backers think him pro-reform and are supporting him.

Thus, the battle for the party chairmanship is far more than just another old-fashioned Democratic donnybrook. Behind the bewildering backroom maneuvers of party leaders, one question of profound importance looms before the Demo-

cratic party: shall the clock be turned back on the reforms of 1972?

The answer from governors, congressional leaders and state chairmen is yes (though, of course, not put that bluntly). They feel a repetition in 1976 of the reform convention of 1972 would guarantee a third straight Republican victory. Their first choice to turn back the clock: Texan Robert Strauss, former national party treasurer.

AN EXACTLY opposite position is taken by Mrs. Westwood's personal staff—especially New York political veteran John F. English, an ardent member of the McGovern Commission named by her as the National Committee's general counsel. Their line has been that Sen. George McGovern as nominee, not the McGovern reforms, was responsible for the debacle of Nov. 7, 1972. Therefore, they reason, reform must be pressed forward.

Just what the Westwood staff really cares about became clearer last week when their secret deliberations at party headquarters in the Watergate were joined by the most zealous reformer of all: Eli Segal,

29-year-old former counsel of the McGovern Commission. Segal cares very little about Mrs. Westwood but very much about the radicalizing process of party reform.

With Mrs. Westwood's enemies multiplying, Segal concocted the idea of dumping her and substituting Mitchell. As principal political lieutenant to Sen. Edmund Muskie and chief of his disastrous presidential campaign, Mitchell was generally acceptable to party regulars and considered one of the McGovern Commission's more moderate members (opposed, for example, to the suicidal delegate quota system that was adopted). Yet, Segal, English and the Westwood staff agreed, Mitchell could be relied on not to turn back the clock.

Strategy suddenly changed. On Nov. 14, a national committee member received a telephone call from a Westwood aide asserting that Mitchell was backing Mrs. Westwood. On Nov. 15, the same committee member received a call from Mitchell himself, indicating Mrs. Westwood was no longer viable and that George Mitchell might be interested in replacing her.

THE LEAKED report to the New York Times that Mrs. Westwood was giving way to Mitchell followed a few days later (much to the chagrin of poor Mrs. Westwood when she read it in the newspaper). "but the intended effect of entrancing anti-Westwood committee members was not entirely successful.

If Mitchell cannot make it either, the Watergate group will turn to somebody else compatible with reform—probably Sargent Shriver. If state chairman Charles Mannatt of California or State Chairman Joseph Crangle of New York or two-time national chairman Lawrence F. O'Brien. Ruled out as anti-reform, however, are Strauss, Gov. Warren Hearnes of Missouri and former Gov. Robert McNair of South Carolina.

But Mrs. Westwood's one-time defenders at the Watergate may be misreading anti-reform sentiment O'Brien, for example, is known to abhor Segal and feel a return toward the middle of the road is essential. Crangle's private views are similar. Most important, close to a majority of the national committee wants a chairman bold enough to take a few steps backward into the past.