

LOUISIANA POLITICS

McKeithen Keeping Eye On Long's Popularity

By BILL LYNCH
(States-Item Bureau)

BATON ROUGE — Despite statements that he isn't planning to run for Sen. Russell B. Long's Senate seat next year, Gov. John J. McKeithen is keeping a watchful eye on Long's public thermometer.

The thermometer could bring a change of mind for Louisiana's popular governor.

Gov. McKeithen appears a shoo-in for reelection in the primaries this fall, but it would not be wise for him to publicly run more than one race at a time.

And at this time, the governor puts it strongly: "I have no plans to run against Russell Long in 1968."

The governor and the senator are the state's two most powerful political figures, and it would take a major falling out of popularity for one to run against the other.

Sooner or later, however, the two will clash somewhere down the line whether by accident or design.

Gov. McKeithen has demonstrated several times since he took office that he is not inclined to put his future on the line where he has much more to lose than to gain — when the odds aren't just right. Therefore, he is, as he has insisted, not apt to run pell mell into a titanic struggle with Russell Long in 1968 unless he has a strong chance of winning handily.

SEN. LONG'S STOCK nationally and statewide appears to have declined somewhat primarily due to his stand on the campaign contribution plan he wrestled with extensively on the Senate floor and his more recent defense of Sen. Dodd. Long's actions in the Dodd case have caused Gov. McKeithen to pause in reflection of his own relations and future with Long.

It was Gov. McKeithen, and without whom it couldn't have been done, who pushed a code of ethics through the Legislature.

No matter how imperfect that code may be, the people demonstrated through an overwhelming vote of approval of the code that they want state employes and officials to conduct themselves in a proper manner in handling state business. It is not stretching a point that they want those on the national scene to do likewise.

Sen. Long, in accusing half the Senate of not being able to stand up to the type of investigation conducted by the ethics committee, left himself vulnerable. He didn't say which half he belonged to. Further, judging from news stories concerning the whole Dodd affair, the Senate ethics committee was rather restrictive in what it did investigate.

Gov. McKeithen is well aware of the public sentiment on codes of ethics and the conduct of public officials.

Further, there is no love lost between McKeithen and Long. The same was true in the case of Sen. Allen J. Ellender. The only reason McKeithen didn't run against Ellender in 1966 is because he was vying for a vote of confidence in the two-term amendment. It was not a propitious time to run for the Senate, even though he had no qualms about taking on Sen. Ellender.

But beating Sen. Ellender would not have provided much victory in the Louisiana political arena. The governor indicated recently that he might find a run for the Senate in 1972 to his advantage. That's when Sen. Ellender's present term expires. Circumstances may well force him to take that road.

★ ★ ★
HOWEVER, THERE IS THIS drawback. McKeithen has national ambitions, including a desire to be vice-president. Waiting until 1972 and beating Ellender or winning that seat should the aging senator step aside would not project him very much on the national scene.

Moreover, he would still be only the junior senator from Louisiana and only one more Democrat on Capitol Hill.

In answer to a report that he told Lt. Gov. C. C. "Taddy" Aycock, after persuading Aycock not to oppose him for governor this year, that he would not finish another four years in the mansion, Gov. McKeithen said: "I have made no commitment or deal with Taddy Aycock."

The implication in the report that he would not serve out another term is, of course, that Aycock would become governor and be in an excellent position to run for a full term in 1972.

Despite the governor's strong denial that he has no intention of not serving out another term, if he is reelected, a head-and-head race with Russell Long could develop.

Beating Russell Long for the Senate would catapult him onto the national scene. He would have to be regarded as more than just another freshman, Democratic senator.

There is another interesting sidelight on this national image business. The governor would like to have Rep. John R. Rarick of the Sixth District run against him in the November Democratic primary.

As things now stand, there is no major opposition on the horizon for a second term bid by McKeithen. This means two things — no campaign contributions and no publicity to speak of.



BILL LYNCH

★ ★ ★
M'KEITHEN FEELS THAT competition by Rarick would provide him with some national publicity. He feels confident he can defeat the conservative congressman who upset veteran James H. Morrison. Further, the governor feels that beating Rarick now would reduce the congressman's future potential in gubernatorial or senatorial campaigns.

Six months ago, McKeithen was saying that polls showed he could defeat Russell Long for governor and Long could beat him for the Senate. The same is not being said today.

As any politician knows, popularity is fickle and can rise and fall dramatically. In 1964, Long set about to mend his political fences among business interests in the state. He did so by bringing new industry into areas which had been his most ardent detractors. He changed attitudes. He may do likewise in 1968.

★ ★ ★
Gov. McKeithen told a recent news conference that he sees no conflict of interest in legislators performing executive department functions, provided those legislators are his administration supporters. The only conflict, he said, would be if he were trying to buy a legislator's vote.

The governor was referring to this column's report on the large number of lawmakers being given administrative jobs and its influence on the separation of powers theory under which American governments operate. As we see it, there isn't much difference in letting Louisiana legislators perform these functions than it would be to have congressmen start running the executive branch of the federal government.