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Committee's Work Travesty--Gurney

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Sen. Edward J. Gurney, President Nixon's staunchest defender on the Senate select Watergate committee, has called the work of the committee a "travesty" in a private letter to Gov. Meldrim Thomson Jr. (R-N.H.).

"The only concrete contributions we have made have been to force down the stock market, up the price of gold, devalue the American dollar, hurt the economy, and destroy the confidence of people in the American political system," Gurney said in the Oct. 5 letter. "These are certainly concrete contributions but about as useful as a block of concrete tied around a swimmer's neck."

Although Gurney's staff at first appeared to disclaim the letter, a spokesman said yesterday that a photocopy of it had been found in Gurney's files. The spokesman said Gurney "characterized it as letting off a little steam."

Thomson sent a telegram to the chairman of the Senate committee, Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), on Sept. 17, complaining about the activities of committee investigators in New Hamp-

shire. Thomson also apparently wrote Gurney about the same matter, although the spokesman for Gurney said yesterday that Thomson's letter could not be found.

In his letter to Thomson, Gurney said, "I have myself been the object of two investigations in Florida by the staff of our very own committee, an action unprecedented in Senate committees as far as I know."

Chief committee counsel Samuel Dash said yesterday that it is absolutely untrue that the committee staff has investigated Gurney. Dash said that one witness who will be called before the committee this week, Miami builder John Priestes, is involved with "a local Sen. Gurney matter," but "we did not get to him because of any investigation having anything to do with Sen. Gurney."

Gurney acknowledged last week that the Justice Department is investigating allegations that Florida builders secretly contributed large sums of money to him and expected preferential treatment by the Federal Housing Administration in return. Gurney has denied knowledge of such fund-raising efforts.

Priestes is one of seven witnesses to be called this week as the committee resumes its hearings today. The committee will question Priestes on the circumstances surrounding solicitation of a contribution to the Nixon re-election campaign in return for a favor from the FHA, according to sources.

The committee also will hear from Ben Fernandez, former chairman of the National Hispanic Finance Committee of the Nixon re-election committee. Dash said that Fernandez's testimony would be tied to Priestes' but Dash declined to provide details.

Another source said that Fernandez also will be questioned about an alleged vote-buying effort in the Spanish-speaking community by the Nixon re-election campaign.

The committee's Republican minority has scheduled four witnesses, all of whom are expected to be heard today, as part of the committee's investigations into "dirty tricks." The minority staff made an extensive effort to find evidence of dirty tricks committed by Democratic candidates. One Republican source said yesterday, however, that he doubted any attempt would be made to tie today's testimony directly to any Democrat, but rather would seek to show that others, besides agents of the Nixon campaign committee, were engaged in improper or unethical campaign conduct.

Prior to today's session, the committee will hear a motion in executive session by Sen. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. (R-Conn.) that the committee request a closed interview with President Nixon at the White House, not under oath but transcribed, with the full transcript of the session made public.