

LOUISIANA POLITICS

Womack Case Raises Questions

By **BILL LYNCH**
(States-Item Bureau)

BATON ROUGE — There was never any question that Rep. Lantz Womack of Franklin Parish, a former legislative leader for Gov. John J. McKeithen, is entitled to reimbursement of his expenses as a member of the Louisiana Financial Assistance Commission.

The question is and has been whether the legislator should have provided receipts and expense accounts and whether the per diem payments he received are legal in view of the fact that the law creating the LFAC limits commission members to actual expenses.

However, Womack says that the commission on governmental ethics, which took up his case behind closed doors and may never be able to publicize what occurred, has found that he served both as a commission member and as an employe.

This seems a little incredible, but the Ethics Commission has made some other incredible decisions in the past, so it won't come as a great shock.

The Ethics Commission ruling has not been made public, although Rep. Womack says he has authorized it to be.

If the Ethics Commission has in fact said that Womack really was serving as an employe as well as a commissioner during the four-year period under contention, it raises the following points:

1. **IS THE DUAL OFFICE-HOLDING** law so ineffective that a legislator may work as an employe of a state agency as well as be a lawmaker? Think of the influence such employes could have if this were extended. The law creating the LFAC provides that legislators might be commissioners, but does not further mention employes of the commission.

2. As an employe, Womack would be required to submit expense accounts and receipts just as other employes and not be entitled to per diem payments unless the travel regulations of the state were waived by the commissioner of administration.

3. If Womack was an unclassified employe of the LFAC his name should have been carried on the roster of unclassified employes of the division of administration.

4. Is the Ethics Commission establishing a precedent that permits state boards and commissions to hire themselves as employes of themselves, setting per diem or salary despite travel regulations?

IT MIGHT TURN OUT THAT WOMACK was indeed entitled to more money than he received, if an audit of his entire per diem payments is made, just as a partial audit showed he was entitled to \$2,100 — about \$150 more than he received. Womack insists he has done considerable work and travel for the LFAC and is entitled to a considerable amount of reimbursement.

He should of course get every cent he is entitled to, whether it be more or less — but the point is that he should not be compensated in a manner that is an exception to the rules and regulations of the state.

The division of administration should make an audit of the full \$15,215 in per diem which he received, including

the six times he received per diem from other state agencies on the same day. For the Ethics Commission to simply say he was an employe and the commission could award him \$13,000 in per diem is reminiscent of its early decision permitting other state officials to retain expense account money they had no right to keep, warning them not to get caught again.

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THE MEETING A WEEK AGO between Gov. McKeithen and members of the Metropolitan Crime Commission of New Orleans seemed fairly harmonious. But the governor's continuing reaction to the national publicity on crime in Louisiana now makes it seem that it may have been more acrimonious than harmonious.

Obviously still upset over the damage to the state's national image, the governor seemed more upset over who provided the information for the articles than over the possibility that such criminal influences may exist.

He went so far as to say that whoever provided the information should feel ashamed and get out of the state. When asked who he was referring to, the governor said "if the shoe fits, wear it."

The shoe, of course, fits the crime commission which made it clear after its meeting with the governor that it had provided the basic facts and furthermore believed the articles had some truth to them.

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M'KEITHEN CALLED THE articles a deliberate smear and said there may be a tie-in between them and the indictment of an investigative reporter for a television network by the New Orleans Grand Jury in the Garrison probe of the Kennedy assassination.

The governor spent a great deal of time on the criminal influence allegations, repeating that he planned an investigation at the state level of government.



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