

State Mafia probers show dual standard for witnesses

Louisiana Politics

By BILL LYNCH

BATON ROUGE — Any doubt that the Legislative Mafia Investigations Committee operates under a dual standard must have been dispelled this week in the two days of the most fruitful of its series of public hearings.

David L. Chandler of New Orleans, prime author of the Life magazine article charging organized crime influences on Louisiana government, testified for two days after months of efforts by the committee to get him on the witness stand.

Chandler was quizzed at length and at times in minute detail about various aspects of the article and probably should have been questioned in even greater detail than he was.

For instance, the committee quizzed Chandler about Jefferson Parish Dist. Atty. Frank Langridge, and a statement linking him to rackets figure Carlos Marcello.

But the committee didn't ask him about statements made about Orleans Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison.

The committee found a weak point in the article concerning the listing of prominent Louisiana persons to phone calls allegedly made from a Houston motel room raided as a gambling operation site.

The name Frank "Tickie" Saia was mentioned prominently in connection with the raid. But the committee made no effort to quiz Chandler on what information he had linking Saia to underworld figures.

For those whose names may have been wrongfully mentioned in the Life article, that point was the most significant. However, more significant, it would seem, is the relationship between Saia and various state officials and the underworld.

The committee was right in asking every question it did, including those seeking the names of persons who provided information to Chandler. In turn, Chandler used his legal rights to protect his sources.

If the sole purpose of the committee were to find out sources so additional information could be developed this would be an admirable position. Unfortunately, as a practical matter, the revelation of sources puts them in jeopardy as to retaliation and would dry up such information from them and other sources as well.

Sen. Claude Duval of Houma, a member of the committee, expressed considerable bitterness over the confidentiality of reporters' sources. It is his position that if the news media makes allegations, it should be able to prove them even to the extent of exposing confidential sources.

It was further Duval's position—more implied than expressly stated — that the press is responsible for the lack of confidence by the public in government because it reports a new scandal almost every day.

Perhaps Duval might also look to the doers of the deeds, rather than those who reveal them, as a possible cause of declining public confidence.

The double standard of conduct on the committee was once again equally evident in the appearance of Gov. John J. McKeithen in rebuttal to Chandler's testimony.

McKeithen acknowledged a \$25,000 contribution from one bank out of \$50,000 that Chandler had charged was given him in return for keeping new banks out of Alexandria. However, no one asked the governor about the other \$25,000 which purportedly came from the owners of another bank.

No questions to McKeithen

Repeatedly, the committee has declined to ask McKeithen about the Readers' Digest charge that Marcello used his name as a reference on a million-dollar insurance policy, or about McKeithen's claim that he knew which gubernatorial candidate received Mafia money.

In many instances, the committee has been so ill-prepared in questioning witnesses—such as Marcello when he appeared—that it looked ridiculous as an investigating body.

The double standard further applied to the very heart of the committee's operation. It is a legislative body supposedly sitting to determine legislation and is thus entitled to hear whatever information it cares to. From some witnesses (including Chandler) it has welcomed hearsay-type testimony while banning it from others, often inconsistently (such as Aaron Kohn): It has called for opinions from some witnesses, barred them from others, let some (such as McKeithen) make speeches and barred them by others (such as Chandler).

J. Marshall Brown 'invited'

Some were to be subpoenaed, some invited and some allowed to appear at their own request. Unfortunately, the guidelines of employes and elected officials appearing under invitation was not uniformly followed, nor was the issuance of subpoenas to non-public officials. J. Marshall Brown, the national Democratic committeeman from Louisiana, was "invited" by committee chairman Sen. Adrian G. Duplantier of New Orleans to appear, although he did not hold public elective office. Brown, one of those featured in the Life article, should have been called a long time ago to testify about the favoritism he received from the state Revenue Department on a \$10,000 tax debt incurred in 1966 and not paid off until last month when the committee got to work on it.