

Connally's Masterful Debut

SAN DIEGO, CALIF.—In his debut as a Republican potentially seeking his party's presidential nomination, ex-Democrat John B. Connally showed last weekend how thoroughly and spectacularly he can sell himself to the most inbred and insular Republican true believers.

The reaction to Connally's stem-winding address to Saturday night's banquet session of the Republican state convention here was typified by one state legislative leader, rigidly conservative and long a faithful supporter of Gov. Ronald Reagan. Like many others, he arrived here curious but skeptical about Connally. After the speech, he confided to us, "If this guy is really running for president, I would say Ron has got problems." It was a frequently voiced sentiment Saturday night.

The fact that Connally was here at all removed one of the two great doubts about his prospects for the presidential nomination. Old Connally watchers doubted he would tear himself from the good life in Houston and Jamaica for the tedious Republican mashed-potato circuit. Yet, he not only came to San Diego in the first of many such party appearances but, in his press conference, sounded precisely

like a presidential candidate three years before the convention.

The second and much more serious doubt concerns the congenital distrust of outsiders by fiercely partisan Republican regulars. But the regulars here were ready to be converted by convert Connally. In fact, it took only 30 minutes of Texas-style oratory.

Connally could not have picked a tougher debut than this convention. Scarcely a cross-section of California Republicans, those attending are hard-core conservative precinct workers fiercely devoted to Reagan's presidential ambitions. Undercurrents of doubt among California Republicans generally about their governor's qualifications for the presidency were certainly not to be found among the regulars here.

Moreover, Connally's intimate associations with Lyndon B. Johnson made him suspect. One California party strategist wondered aloud before the speech whether the old Connally-LBJ partnership might prove embarrassing in a presidential campaign. The link was underlined by the fact that Connally was accompanied here from Texas by his close friend and political adviser George Christian, President Johnson's last and favorite press secretary (and still a Democrat).

Counteracting this attitude was a masterful performance by Connally in his press conference (agreed to by him after some early balking), a 40-minute walkthrough of a \$100-a-ticket cocktail party for him and finally the banquet speech itself. When Connally digressed during the speech into an impromptu lecture on international economics, some Republicans here suggested he might just be a little deeper than their own Ronald Reagan.

Although one prominent state party leader complained that Connally "sounds too much like a Baptist preacher," his evangelical conservatism delighted the rank-and-file regular from the moment he told them: "I left the Democratic Party of my father's past to join the Republican Party of my children's future."

Moreover, Connally maintained a discreet distance between himself and President Nixon without seeming anti-Nixon. At his press conference, he stressed he had not seen the President lately but implied that Mr. Nixon was belatedly taking his advice on how to handle Watergate. His prepared speech, echoing White House attacks on preoccupation with Watergate, was altered in delivery to make a more general inspirational appeal.

The sum total of this might well appeal to some influential California Re-

publicans not here last weekend: moderate money men such as industrialist Leonard Firestone and entertainment executive Taft Schreiber who have grown distant from Reagan and are not enthusiastic about a last hurrah from Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York.

Indeed, singing Connally's praises behind the scenes here was one influential backroom figure in moderate Republican politics with significant money-raising talents. He was visible at Connally's side, introducing him and his wife, Nellie, to the local fat cats at the \$100 cocktail party.

However, barring the worst misfortunes befalling Reagan the next three years, it is hardly conceivable that he will even be challenged in the 1976 primary for this state's huge delegation. Reagan, lustily cheered in the convention windup Sunday morning, has no reason to fear Connally in California.

But with Vice President Spiro T. Agnew now consigned to political oblivion by head-shaking regulars here, Connally can rightly be called the second-choice in California following his triumphant debut. That's more than his most ardent supporters could have had any reason to expect after four months as a Republican and his first Republican speech.