

Interview with Rep. John J. McFall (D-CA)

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A self-starter who has a good idea of the influence structure in the House.

“There are three committees whose functions touch all other members of the House. Ways and Means chooses the members of other committees. The Rules Committee has control over the business of the House, and the Appropriations Committee has the money. I served seven years on the public works subcommittee, and I had a lot of water projects. That’s very important in my district. I had them all authorized and was getting some money for them. But I thought the power would be important. It’s a matter of power. Like [John] Kennedy said about the presidency, that’s where the power is.” He recalled the story by Rep. Joe Ewins (D-TN).

He talked about trading among subcommittees. He saw this as an important factor internally. “It depends on the friends you can make on other subcommittees. There’s the fellow who asked me about a hospital he’s got coming up. Then, when I want something to be done, I will go and see him. They’ll pay more attention to me when I’m a member of the Committee. You trade back and forth that way.” This idea bulks large with him. “It’s a matter of scratching each others’ backs, I suppose. But that’s the only way you ever get any specific thing accomplished around here.”

“The process [in the House] is one where consent must be obtained before anything gets done. If you are one of those from whom consent must be obtained, then you are a more important person in the House. When you’re on the Appropriations Committee, you are that kind of person. That’s all. It’s a question of power.” This, in explanation of why he wanted to get on the Committee.

He was a self-starter. He had the seniority in the California delegation. He went around and told people he wanted it, saw the Ways and Means Committee people. “It’s like getting elected to this body in the first place.” Rep. John F. Shelley (D-CA) resigned (January 7, 1964), and McFall went on the Committee early. “He [Shelley] did me a great favor by resigning early. I could slip right in before anyone else could get interested in it. I went on at the last meeting of the Ways and Means last year.” Shelley didn’t talk to him about it.

How did he get the Military Construction Subcommittee? “Mr. Sheppard [Rep. Harry R. Sheppard (D-CA)] went and asked Mr. Cannon [Appropriations Committee Chairman Clarence Cannon (D-MO)] if I could go on. They are old friends, and Cannon did it as a personal favor to Mr. Sheppard. He was already looking forward to his retirement, and he felt California should have someone on the subcommittee. Shelley was on there, and it was easy for me to go right on.”

Regarding the complaints of the young people: They don’t see the report, “the subcommittee chairman and the ranking minority members speak and explain the provisions. But they work hand-in-glove, and there is no conflict between them. Then the

chairman says, 'Without objection, the report is approved.' There are no votes. I haven't seen a vote, yet. You would have to stand up and say, 'I object.' And if you did, all hell would break loose. So we just look at each other, and no one objects. That's another example of the power the chairman exercises."

He says that he went to see Cannon before he went on the Committee to tell him who he was, how long he had been in Congress, and so forth. "He smiles at me. I doubt if he recognizes me. He probably recognizes my name, though. When he sees it on a list, he probably thinks, 'there's that friend of Harry Sheppard's.' But I wouldn't want to sell him short. He may know everything about me."

He says Cannon controls the Appropriations Committee more than Chairman Charles A. Buckley (D-NY) controlled the Public Works Committee. Buckley let his subcommittee chairmen go. "Cannon exercises a constant surveillance. Nothing escapes him. He watches all the subcommittees to see that no one is on there who as a personal interest. He abolishes subcommittees and decapitates subcommittee chairmen. All the Committee's actions have the stamp of the Chairman on them." This is a typically overdrawn picture by a newcomer which attributes all the power to Cannon.

He seems more cautious in his remarks than some of the other new ones.

Regarding agency-Committee relations, he said he didn't think I would get any information on that. He spoke of "under the table," and "skeletons in the closet," and "individual members who are in a position to exercise influence doing so."