

This is an interview with Ned McWherter, speaker of the Tennessee house of representatives. The interview was conducted in Dresden, Tennessee by Jack Bass on August 20, 1974. It was transcribed by Joe Jaros.

J.B.: . . . a little bit about the legislature in Tennessee and how it works. The role of speaker for one thing. The speaker, is that an office in which the speaker often succeeds himself?

Ned McWherter: Well, the speakers . . . in the history of Tennessee, in the years of the Ellington-Clement organization, the speakers usually served at the desired discretion of the governor, Clement or Governor Ellington. As you know, they held office for some sixteen to twenty years.

J.B.: Right.

McWherter: And when the Republican governor, Winfield Dunn, was elected governor, the first Republican, I believe, in some fifty years, then the speaker's office was up for grabs. And as a rule, up until that time, they had served at the pleasure of the governor and since that time, the legislative branch has become predominant in being independent and had started a trend of independency before the Republican governor was elected. And now, it's just strictly a matter of the legislature, the members of the legislature, the party that controls the house or senate, electing their own speaker. They have become absolutely an independent branch of government. Which they should be.

J.B.: And it's been pretty much a question of the party caucus?

McWherter: No question about the party caucus. The first two years under the Dunn administration, I was chairman of the Democratic caucus in the house and we elected Mr. McKinney and then I ran against Mr. McKinney and defeated him in the second legislative term of the four year term of the governor.

J.B.: Am I correct that the race was really ~~within~~ the Democratic caucus? You defeated him in the caucus and then once that was over, all Democrats voted for you?

McWherter: That's correct. I defeated former Speaker McKinney in the caucus and then all fifty-one Democrats in the house supported me.

J.B.: Because all that it would have taken would have been a defection, at that time, of two?

McWherter: Two defections would have defeated me, that's correct.

J.B.: And so, the impression I get is that within the legislature, particularly within the house, is that party unity is pretty strong and is there any form of party discipline imposed, or does it come up?

McWherter: Well, of course, under my past administration, I appointed a committee that I call the Blue Ribbon House Modernization Committee and we completely changed the operation of the house. The story really being that the only modernization of the legislature and the house in the past fifty or sixty years, or seventy-five years, came with the invention of the typewriter. That's about the only change we had. And we changed the committee system under my administration. We changed the clerk system of the house, we're changing the journal now.

J.B.: You print a daily journal now?

McWherter: We print a daily journal

J.B.: What does the daily journal contain?

McWherter: Well, of course, the daily journal is printed at night after our session is over and it contains all the legislation and all the pertinent details relating to what happened on the floor that day and it is published the next morning and put on the legislators' desks.

J.B.: Does that include all roll calls votes?

McWherter: Yes.

J.B.: That's something new, am I correct?

McWherter: That's definitely new. In other words, when you vote in the house today, there is no changing of your vote at some later time, it's recorded that day and that night it's printed out for the public and it is definitely a roll call vote.

J.B.: The old system, which I've heard about, was one in which a member could go back and change his vote as long as it didn't change the outcome of the bill?

McWherter: That's correct. In the years past, it's been . . . I wouldn't say that it has been a practice, it's been done, that a man would be coming up for re-election two years later and would maybe go back and have the journal changed to reflect his vote at some particular time on an issue, if it would not change the outcome of a bill.

J.B.: Can that still be done?

McWherter: That cannot be done. It cannot be done after the journal is printed on the same night of the legislative meeting that day.

J.B.: Can it be done between the meeting and the printing?

McWherter: No, the policy about our daily journal on roll call vote is that you can go up to the chief clerk of the house and tell him to print into the journal that you voted yea or nay and you desire that your vote be

changed, but the vote will not be changed. Your statement will be reflected in the journal. That's in case a man actually made an honest mistake.

J.B.: The actual debate proceedings are not printed, am I correct?

McWherter: The actual debate itself is not printed totally into the journal, that's correct. All motions and all pertinent facts are printed in regards to any bill that is on the floor.

J.B.: Is the same true in the senate?

McWherter: The senate . . . no, it is not. The senate does not at this time have a daily journal. However, I am advised by the speaker of the senate that they plan to institute the program this year. It was really a matter of moving into the unknown as to whether or not we could do it with our present equipment and keep the cost in line. And we were able by . . . I have a very efficient and aggressive young clerk of the house that joined my organization when I came to be speaker.

J.B.: What were the changes in the committee system that you . . .

McWherter: The changes in the committee system, basically, were that I appointed all Democrats to the officers of the committee. I followed the United States Congress in this matter. And one major change was that since highway, the highway department of transportation and that department is one of our three largest budgetary departments, we broke the highway department out from under the so called general welfare committee that handles, the general welfare committee in the past handled public health, mental health and the department of transportation. And we felt that the department of transportation along with education should require a separate committee.

J.B.: So, you now have how many committees?

McWherter: We have ten committees, standing committees and one calendar

and rules committee.

J.B.: Does the senate have the same committee structure?

McWherter: No, the senate is some different than we are. They don't have as many committees. Basically, the reason being that the legislature in Tennessee, the house is made up of ninety-nine members and the senate is made up of thirty-three members. And consequently, we have much more legislation introduced and to handle than the senate does.

J.B.: Does each senatorial district consist of three house districts?

McWherter: Basically they do, but some house districts overlap over into other senatorial districts.

J.B.: But it's not absolute.

McWherter: Basically it is one to three. The three house districts would not necessarily in all cases conform to the boundaries of one senate district.

J.B.: Do you expect the Democrats to maintain a majority in both houses of the legislature?

McWherter: Well, in the house . . . (inaudible) . . . in the senate they will maintain a majority since they have a substantial majority today and they only have two or three contested races. In the house, we have most of our . . . I believe that at the present time, we have twenty-nine Democrats that do not have opposition. We have five Democrats, most of them are incumbents that have token Independent opposition. We basically figure today that we have thirty-four Democrats that are elected. And we have fifteen Republicans without opposition. I think that we will improve our majority. I don't have any question that we will improve it. We'll add an additional black seat in Chattanooga, Tennessee. We'll retain all of our black seats in Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee and we feel now that we

will pick up a number of seats in the rural black communities and also the urban communities. The real change in the legislature in the last few years is that the Democrats have been losing in the urban areas of Shelby County, Hamilton County, and Knox County. That's been the pattern.

J.B.: But within the non-urban areas of the state, then, Republicans have so far made few inroads?

McWherter: Well, right off the top of my head, they have made an inroad in Gibson County, which we will definitely pick up this time. They made one in Tipton County, which we have a real good chance of picking up this time. I don't think they've taken over two or three rural seats from the Democrats in the last four years.

J.B.: Now, I understand that Annabelle Clement O'Brien has a very good chance of picking up what has been a traditional Republican seat.

McWherter: Well, we are counting on her as a winner. We have her down now as a winner, definitely.

J.B.: And that's a seat now held by a Republican?

McWherter: And has traditionally been held by a Republican.

J.B.: What sort of role do you expect her to play in the legislature, considering her level of experience being different from most freshmen?

McWherter: She'll be probably the most valuable freshman that has ever entered the house in the last twenty years, because of the legislative independence today and with her background in government and her knowledge of the needs of the people of Tennessee and also her knowledge of how the legislative process works. Being a freshman, she'll be a valuable asset to the Democratic party.

J.B.: What's the most important and prestigious house committee ?

McWherter: We would say today that the most . . . let's change the word, "prestigious" to "important."

J.B.: All right.

McWherter: The most important house committee today is the finance ways and means committee, which is chaired by Representative Bragg from Murfreesboro and he is probably the most knowledgeable man of state government and state finances today on Capitol Hill and would rank up with the commissioner of finance and administration in knowledge of state government and state expenses and the state requirements of the dollar that we have available. He's an excellent man, owns a printing company and spends probably . . . he's able to spend almost 75 to 100% of his time in state government.

J.B.: Does the speaker designate the chairman of the committee?

McWherter: The speaker designates at his discretion, makes appointments of the chairman, vice-chairman and secretary and makes all assignments to committees from the total membership.

J.B.: What has been your policy in regard to Republican committee assignments?

McWherter: My policy has been, when I became speaker, it is very evident, the record speaks for itself, that I tried to pattern the Tennessee house in the way of appointments from the United States Congress. I feel like that if my leadership as speaker is going to be a reflection on the record of whatever progress the legislature makes, that I should control the committees. And I appointed all Democrats, which were very able men, to chairmanships. I feel like if we are responsible as the majority party in the house and the controlling party, that we should operate the house and we take whatever credit should be given and we take whatever criticism.

J.B.: How about in regard to the proportion of seats on the committees? Is it uniform, or is it more Democrats on some committees and less on others.

McWherter: Yes, some committees . . . my finance ways and means committee is controlled by the Democratic party. I try to advise with the Republican leadership in the house as to where their men should be and what committees they can more ably serve on and this has a lot to do with where the Republican appointments go. But there are some committees, for example, the finance ways and means, that handles the appropriations of the budget, and you know that under our state constitution, we have the three branches of government, the executive, and the legislative and the judiciary and there can't a dollar be spent unless it is appropriated by the house and the senate. The government just carries out the programs that we appropriate the dollars for.

J.B.: How many members on that committee?

McWherter: The average committee rate is from a low of sixteen to about a high of twenty-two to twenty-four and the finance ways and means committee would usually have eighteen to twenty members.

J.B.: How many are Democrats, or were the last time?

McWherter: I would say that out of the twenty members that I think we had, I think that we probably had a fourteen member majority. That's just off the top of my head.

J.B.: Do any of the committees have a Republican majority?

McWherter: Oh, yes. The transportation committee, as I recall, has a Republican majority and I know that the conservation committee has a Republican majority. Some of the committees were evenly apportioned. But going back, the committee that handles the appropriation bill, I felt, should be controlled by the leadership of the house, because it is a reflection on what we do and we want some input in the appropriations bill.

J.B.: Did you appoint any blacks either as committee chairmen or vice-chairmen?

McWherter: I appointed a black chairman of the judiciary committee.

J.B.: Who is that?

McWherter: Ira Murphy from Shelby County. I think that it is the first black that has probably chaired a committee in many, many years. And I also appointed the first black in the clerk's office . . . I don't recall in history when they had a black that was on the speaker's staff as the assistant clerk.

J.B.: Is the judiciary committee considered a major committee?

McWherter: Yes, the judiciary committee would basically be considered a major committee and due to the fact that we handle a lot of legislation in regards to the Missouri Plan and made the change in the Missouri Plan to elect our supreme court by the people. And also in the consideration of no-fault bills that are in all states now and the consideration that is being given it on the national level.

J.B.: Did no-fault pass the house?

McWherter: That's the funny thing. No-fault . . . the governor's so-called no-fault bill has passed the house. We did a . . . it didn't pass the senate . . . we had a special committee make a study of no-fault then, this past year and Representative Roger Murray from Madison County was chairman of it and they made a study and came back with the recommendation of the so-called Delaware Plan and that passed the house. And also the bill known in the Tennessee legislature as the Davis-Baker bill, Senator Davis and Senator Baker passed the house. Three different no-fault bills passed the house of representatives. None of them passed the senate.

J.B.: Is the farm bureau the strongest lobby in Tennessee?

McWherter: I wouldn't say that the farm bureau is the strongest lobby in Tennessee. I would say that the farm bureau is a very effective lobby in Tennessee. I have studied the organizations that do lobby in the house and given much consideration to it. The farm bureau has a unique way. They try to concern themselves with things that only pertain to their people. They never get into issues that don't pertain to the farmer in Tennessee. Of course, they have their insurance company that they are concerned with. But they would be considered a strong, effective group in Tennessee, I would say. I would not say that they would be the strongest.

J.B.: Who would be?

McWherter: I don't know if you have the strongest as such. You have the, of course, as in all states, you have the labor group, you have the banking interests, this year we had some strong feelings about state and federal savings and loan . . . of course, I would probably say that the strongest individual group in which I . . . (inaudible) . . . would be the Tennessee Educational Association.

J.B.: Are they concerned primarily with teacher pay and that type issue or

McWherter: Of course, that's one of their issues, in all fairness to TEA, they are concerned . . . and I am very pleased about this, they are really concerned with total educational programs in the state. Teachers' salaries, of course, they represent the teachers and naturally, they are concerned about that, but the truth is that Tennessee, the teachers were very low paid. One of the problems was that we were making contributions at the state level, but actually, the contributions at the local support level never kept up with the state dollar that we were putting into education. So, they are concerned about the teacher pay, naturally, I would say that

was one of their top priorities, but they are concerned also about the total system, the supplies and the various things. In their program, I think that if you will look at it, you will see that they are concerned about the reducing of the teacher-student ratio, they are concerned about the supplies, getting more money for the supplies in the schools.

J.B.: How effective have the black legislators been as a group and working as a group?

McWherter: The black legislators in all, total all-in-all, in my judgement, have been effective in the legislature for their people. We're fortunate, in my judgement, to have very able black people in the legislature. They are very level headed legislators as a whole, there are exceptions, but as a group, they ask for reasonable, fair treatment and they have been given fair treatment by most all legislators. I'd say that they are effective and are becoming more effective for their people.

J.B.: They, in effect, trade . . . and I don't mean that word in a bad sense necessarily . . . and I ask you also in the context of the fact that Tennessee is unique in the South in having this number of black legislators in the legislature that is so close to being evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats and that gives them a balance of power

McWherter: They naturally did have the balance of power with fifty-one Democrats in the house this year, but the black people of Tennessee and the black legislators of Tennessee, in my judgement, make reasonable requests. And they could have been in a position of trading, but I would say that our black legislative members came to us in the spirit of negotiating and we were able to accomodate some of the requests that they had that we all felt comfortable in. I think in the South, my knowledge of politics is . . . I consider myself an old timey Tennessee Democrat. I've educated myself to

the fact that the blacks do have problems and they do need more response from the legislature. They need more response from leadership. And I think that those of us in leadership should be more responsive to the black community and the black people. And going in a roundabout way to answer your question, my leadership has been receptive to what the blacks need and I want to be in the future and I plan to be. And of course, I plan to be re-elected and will be in the future. We are able to work with the blacks, I'll put it that way.

J.B.: Do you expect to get black support in your re-election campaign?

McWherter: Yes, I already have endorsed black support. Shelby County, Davidson . . . and we'll have one black seat, the first black seat in Chattanooga, which we redrew the district to give . . . to show you some concern we have, Chattanooga, Tennessee has a large black population and the two Democrats that were in Chattanooga, and my leadership felt that the blacks should have representation by a seat in the house and we so drew this seat this last year and a black will be coming to the house from that district in Chattanooga in 1975.

J.B.: Republicans say that the whole legislative district statewide, seats were re-drawn to maximize the potential number of Democrats?

McWherter: Well, of course, I think that the record speaks for itself there, because when the legislature was reapportioned, the Republicans gained seats. We had fifty-six two years ago, we had fifty-one this past year, so I think that the record speaks for itself.

J.B.: How would you characterize the state of the Democratic party in Tennessee?

McWherter: Well, I think that the true characteristic of the Democratic party in Tennessee is definitely, well, has been in shambles for the last

two to four years. I think that Tennessee enjoyed an excellent executive branch under Frank Clement and the years of Clement and Elliot. Clement particularly was an outstanding administrator that faced the needs of the people of Tennessee at the time that the needs were there. I think that he will go down in history as one of our better governors. I think that since then, that with . . . maybe the problem with the Democratic party in Tennessee is that we haven't offered the candidates in the Democratic party that were acceptable to the people, the populace across the state. And in this, I mean that Tennessee today, in my judgement, is no longer a Democratically controlled or Republican controlled state. I don't think that any man can be elected to a statewide office strictly with the Democratic vote or with the Republican vote. You have to get the Independent vote and you have to offer candidates that can get the Democratic vote and can also get the Independent vote in this state.

J.B.: Does the lack of a run-off provision weaken the Democratic party in selecting statewide candidates?

McWherter: Well, our leadership felt that we should have had a run-off bill. I think that yes, it does, to answer your question. Next would be that we will introduce a run-off bill this year and pass it. The Democratic party, the leadership in the house introduced a run-off bill in the last session and passed it and the Republican governor vetoed it.

J.B.: But his veto was not overridden?

McWherter: His veto was not overridden. If we have a majority of the house this year, we think we will, and with the senate in the control that it has, we will pass a run-off bill and that will become the law, either by the governor's signature or by override. I predict that the run-off bill will

be law in Tennessee next year. And I'm for it.

J.B.: Could you explain to me why the opposition to income tax is so strong in Tennessee and do you think that will eventually happen?

McWherter: Well, I think that our forefathers that wrote our state constitution were right, probably, in not . . . in prohibiting us from having a state income tax. I don't know . . . the so-called sales tax in our state is becoming so regressive on the working man and the small business man that if we have a state income tax, we must have tax release for these people written into the law or written into the constitutional change, in my judgement. I started out a very poor boy and when I got out of high school, I went to work, I was not able to go to college. I come rural farm community type family and environment. And I have been more fortunate maybe than other people and I pay my taxes every year. But I guess that since I've gotten to the point where I am now, I know how tough it is when you start out and I know how tough it is today on the people that are working and trying to make a living in this two, so-called two digit inflation that we have. And I'm concerned about the man that really carries the tax load in our state and that's the working man and that's the small business man. In the company of the size that I operate or the business community today, we just pass on inflation. We have to to maintain our profit structure. So, the tax doesn't hurt us that much. It won't change my standard of living, but I am concerned about the people that work and the small business people that I've always been known and came up through that environment and associated with. If you are going to put an income tax on, it can't be put on to them as additional taxes. It's got to go on the more affluent and it's got to be extra.

J.B.: Do you think the call for the next constitutional convention will

discussion of that issue?

McWherter: I'm not sure. I've been trying to get a feel of the people. I think that if a state income tax is to be passed, or a constitutional call for it to be passed in Tennessee . . . (inaudible) . . . I assume that you know that the procedure would be to have a constitutional convention called and then it would go back to the people for their vote for a constitutional change. I believe honestly that if there is ever a chance to have a state income tax in Tennessee, there will have to be a major and total educational program to sell the people on what is going to transpire. And also, there will have to be tied to this, if you have a state income tax, that there would have to be some relief of other individual taxes.

J.B.: Were you surprised that in this year's gubernatorial race, where you had so many candidates, none of them sought to make that an issue from the standpoint of attempting to educate the public on ramifications?

McWherter: Not really surprised, because of the fact that the so-called man on the street in Tennessee is opposed to a state income tax. And I think that if a candidate were to come out during a campaign for a state income tax, I think that would contribute to his defeat, truthfully.

J.B.: How about in the context of tax reform?

McWherter: Well, in the context of tax reform, I'm not sure about this, but I think that some candidates said that there could be a need for tax reform in the state, but to just come out for a state income tax, I don't recall any candidate being for it. I'd say that I think that Tennessee will probably, if we continue at the growth of expenditure that we have now, that we will probably have to have tax reform in the future. You know, Tennessee from the years 1962 to 1972, we were the third largest state to

get new industrial jobs in the United States. But I believe that it is predicted, we are just shy of four million people, that in the next sixteen years, that our population growth in Tennessee will be 25% more. They are shooting at a situation where we are maintaining a progressive government, that we will have just shy of five million people by . . . in the next sixteen years. So, this will bring on an orderly manner of tax reform, in my judgement. It will be required.

J.B.: And tax reform will have to include consideration of an income tax.

McWherter: Well, of course, it would have to ~~xxxxxxx~~ include consideration. Of course, all this depends on what happens at the national level. I mean, we are looking at . . . I think that in politics today you have got to look down a road at a plan and I think that we are looking at national health insurance. You know, our welfare programs are almost, I believe, have been 80% federalized today. We are not putting as much money into welfare as we were a few years ago. Basically, I think that in our state, from my knowledge, the county governments operate on real estate taxes. The state government operates basically on sales tax and the federal government operates on an income tax from Tennessee. I'm talking about our people of Tennessee. And this is the way that the Tennesseans fund the three governments. The local government with property, the state government with sales tax and the national government with income tax. And you know, just about half the revenues in Tennessee today come into our system in Tennessee come from the sales tax. I believe honestly, in regard to the federal income tax, that there should be a base figure where a man can live and support his family before he . . . he should make something, some twelve thousand or some figure, or fifteen thousand in the future or whatever the figure might be, before he is required to ever

pay any kind of state income tax. I believe that if a base figure of exemption were put into the law, that the people would not be that much opposed to it, but then, I think that the so-called man that is paying the burden of the taxes in Tennessee is entitled to this today.

J.B.: I want to ask you about the governor's race. Do you really think that ~~Blanton will go in?~~ Blanton will go in?

McWherter: I think that Ray Blanton has got the opportunity to put this state together and will have the help to be successful.

J.B.: In person . . . we went to the unity luncheon, or the press conference afterwards

McWherter: You're talking about the candidates, or the day

J.B.: The candidates. And, is that all show or is there more significance to that?

McWherter: I believe that it is more significant than show. I've talked to some of the leading nominees. For example, Jay Buchard is no show, he's totally committed to helping Ray Blanton. To help the party regain the governor's chair.

J.B.: Does that include financial support?

McWherter: Yes.

J.B.: That's the real issue, isn't it? That Blanton, it's not out of loyalty to him, but it's really, am I correct, that it . . . is there a feeling on the part of Democrats in Tennessee that if they lose the governor's office this year, they may lose it for some time to come?

McWherter: Well, of course, that's the theory. I personally feel that that's a correct

J.B.: Is that the unifying

McWherter: But you've got to go back, now, you've got to go back . . . you know, I'm not a history student. All I know is what I've read myself, but we go back to the Gordon Browning days, where Governor Browning came on with the first real farm to market rural road program ever inaugurated in this state. A great Democrat with a terrific record of public service. Go back to Jim McCord days as governor . . . (tape turned off)

J.B.: The grass roots people in Tennessee are basically Democrats.

McWherter: The grass roots people of Tennessee are Democrats. Blanton is representative really, of the soil, a rural (inaudible) county boy and he represents the grass roots element of Tennessee. The problem in Tennessee with the people that have become Independents is that the people of our state could not buy candidates like George McGovern, you know, and you've got to look at the record. The people from Tennessee could not buy George McGovern. Nixon has always been considered the outstanding vote getter in Tennessee, but the facts are that George Wallace defeated Nixon in Tennessee in a presidential primary. So, the grass roots in Tennessee are Democrats. It's the candidates that we've had that have lost our seats in the legislature, it's the candidates that we've had that have lost statewide and nationally. I think that Blanton is basically grass roots.

J.B.: As I understand it, isn't there some Democratic effort at recruiting candidates for the legislature?

McWherter: Oh, yes. I made a total effort this year with my leadership. Two complete trips across the state.

J.B.: Is that how Annabelle Clement O'Brien got in?

McWherter: Oh, yes, I think that Annabelle . . . I asked Annabelle Clement O'Brien to run three times before she ever agreed to run for the house. I think that this is what it is all about.

J.B.: What do you look for in a candidate in terms of a Democrat?

McWherter: A candidate that can be representative of the people of his or her district.

J.B.: How do you find these people?

McWherter: You have to . . . well, basically, you can't go into a rural area and have a very liberal candidate. I think that the party is broad in Tennessee. At the same time, you can't go into an urban area and have the most conservative candidate that you could run. You've got to fit the candidate of our party to the representative district that they are running in. And we tried to do that this year and we worked hard to do that. And it brings all of our party together. And in my judgement, our party is made up of the people of Tennessee and we are the people's party. And we haven't been coordinating that and putting the effort into coordination that we should have in the past when we were losing. So, this will be the test this year to see how we come out. When you write your book, if we are right, we'll have an increase in the house for the Democratic party and if my strategy is wrong, then we will have a decrease. We made two trips across the state working candidates, asking people to run that we thought were representative of the people of that district. Before the primaries and I just completed a trip all the way across the state working on our nominees now since the primaries are over.

J.B.: Did the state party . . . are you working with Sasser in that?

McWherter: Yes. I'm one of those people that like to play on the team. I work with them and I've been working very closely, for example , with the state Democratic chairman on what we call the great supreme court that is elected in Tennessee. We felt that, I'm believe that I'm right, that a member of the supreme court, or the supreme court, has not been elected by the people of Tennessee in fifty years. We in the legislature thought that it was time

to let the people of Tennessee elect their supreme court.

J.B.: How significant was that election from the standpoint of the Democratic party in Tennessee?

McWherter: That's a milestone of significance to start with, in my judgement. I think, now . . . I'm hoping now, my wishes are that that's the first step in restoring the Democratic party to total control in Tennessee. And you know, we offered these candidates. They were excellent candidates and they had the ability to draw a heavy vote and be elected by a big majority.

J.B.: What sort of support does the state party give legislative candidates?

McWherter: The state party, as we said earlier, of course, the Democrats have been in trouble in Tennessee in the last few years. The state party has been in debt and they have not been able to contribute any support to the house or senate members. In turn, Lieutenant Governor Wilder, the speaker of the senate and myself, tried to hold on to the party as best we could during the years of the Dunn governorship and the Republicans having both senate officers, until we could get to where we are now. And we have had fund raising affairs across the state and were able to raise some funds for the house and senate and were able actually to help make some contributions through our organizations and efforts and fund raising, to give the state executive committee some money to help pay on their debt. And we did that this last year and also this year. So, we've tried to hang on as best we could until we could get to where we are today and help the party and help the state organization and help our respective houses. And we haven't done the best job, but we've tried.

J.B.: Well, these candidates that you are recruiting this year, or recruited . . . through these fund raising efforts, are you able to make

campaign contributions to these legislative

McWherter: . . . made campaign contributions all over the state.

J.B.: How much are they, I mean, roughly?

McWherter: Roughly, five hundred to a thousand dollars.

(interruption on tape. Tape turned off)

J.B.: Is that a new development?

McWherter: Oh yes, I don't know recall ever when legislators have had to (inaudible) money to start their campaigns off. And this money, incidentally, that we are able to contribute, I think our caucus will . . . we're public, you know, we sponsored an ethics and disclosure bill last year in the house, which the Republicans actually . . . I couldn't get enough votes to pass it. But the money that we are able to contribute has been totally disclosed in the media and all over the state, to all media and this money is money that the caucus has made through barbecues and receptions and those things, in the last two years. And I'm hopeful that we will have between eighty and a hundred thousand dollars to spend in house races.

J.B.: Senator Gore introduced Blanton at that Saturday meeting, am I correct on that?

McWherter: Yes.

J.B.: We talked to Senator Gore afterwards. Is Blanton . . . I'm trying to understand, you know, Blanton's strategy. I get the feeling that a lot of people are out there waiting and willing to help who may not necessarily have supported him in the primary.

McWherter: I found this. You know, immediately when the primary was over, we started . . . I took the Democratic caucus chair and (inaudible) and myself made this trip across the state and we found that all the Democrats

in other camps were willing and waiting to get started in their respective areas.

J.B.: For Blanton?

McWherter: For Blanton.

J.B.: Isn't his basic problem to broaden his base?

McWherter: Oh, I think that he's got . . . there's no question about that that's what he has got to do and I think that he is working on that now. I happen to be involved in helping him.

J.B.: Would he be doing such things as actually asking Senator Gore to stump for him?

McWherter: Oh, I think so.

J.B.: How about

McWherter: I think that he already has.

J.B.: How about such things as public endorsement of Harold Ford's congressional race?

McWherter: I don't know what that situation is with Harold Ford. I just . . . I don't know whether Ford and Blanton are so far apart that it would be impossible to get together. I just don't know about that. Ford has been a former member of our house and we had our meeting in Memphis last Thursday, and his brother, his younger brother, has been elected to the house and he was not present. His older brother, John, came by, the one that was elected to the senate, and joined in our meeting. We discussed legislative and senate races and the governor's race was not discussed. Except that many people volunteered that they were going to help Ray and wanted to run with him. Let me say here, you mentioned Gore. Gore
(end of side A of tape)

J.B.: We were discussing Gore

McWherter: Albert Gore introduced Ray Blanton. The biggest loss to the people of Tennessee was Albert Gore losing to Bill Brock.

J.B.: What in your opinion, caused that defeat?

McWherter: A time of this Judge Carswell situation, and a time when Tennessee was going through maybe a transition period of some people accepting more liberal views . . . I believe that maybe Gore was . . . some people said that maybe Gore had Potomac Fever, you know, you stay up there so long. I think that Gore had such a distinguished record of service as United States Senator for Tennessee and for our country, that he was maybe a few years ahead of the grass root element thinking of Tennessee. I've analyzed that many times and I think that, it had to be that, that he is out front a little more than the people down here in Tennessee. You know, you've got to remember that Albert Gore received in the election that he was defeated in, the largest vote that any Democratic nominee ever received in the history of the state of Tennessee. The single largest vote.

J.B.: Let me get your reaction to a possible theory. I'm familiar with the tradition of the "three states of Tennessee", and both the historical differences in those sections and the political, historical differences in the section. And yet, I'm also struck by the fact that statewide, pretty much, across Tennessee, insofar as religion is concerned, there will be some variance with denominational strength, perhaps from one area to another a little bit. But, it's pretty much a Protestant state tending somewhat toward conservatism, but that's pretty uniform across the state.

McWherter: I agree.

J.B.: And my question is, how much impact did Brock's, the way that he utilized the prayer in school issue, have in that campaign?

McWherter: In my judgement, it was a total disgrace, the way he utilized it and the amount of money he spent on it the last week or ten days, on radio particularly. It was a disgrace to the average thinking Tennessean. Apparently it had some effect at a time when Senator Gore was being criticized about the Carswell vote, you recall, and maybe for being too liberal, being concerned about the blacks of Tennessee and the labor of Tennessee. And also, the presidential situation fitting in at that time to the attitudes of Tennessee. And of course, the busing matter was a big issue in Nashville at that time, you know, cross town busing

J.B.: In your opinion, did the prayer thing have more impact than busing, the way that it was used in that campaign?

McWherter: I definitely believe that the prayer thing had more impact. I don't recall Gore being involved too deeply in the busing situation. He was involved in it, but no question about the prayer thing, and I think, looking back now, and I don't care to discuss Watergate or Nixon, because I just made a statement to the press a few minutes about my feeling about that, but looking back now, I think Brock used Nixon type electoral processes in his campaign against Gore. I think that's the first maybe, in the defeat of Senator Gore, was the first that we had really seen of what was coming out of Washington, into the South. I think that Brock will be defeated.

J.B.: One of the impressions that we've gotten is that Brock is more of a unifying force in the Democratic party in Tennessee than any other single factor. I mean, that it's a negative unifying force.

McWherter: No question about that. In my judgement, Brock will be defeated.

J.B.: And almost regardless of who the Democratic nominee is, it's

going to have strong support and if it's a strong nominee is Fulton likely to be the nominee?

McWherter: I would say that . . . of course, I can tell you now that I talked to Fulton three days ago and if Howard Baker had been the vice-presidential nominee, Fulton would have announced for Baker's seat that same hour and would have had my support. I'm not sure that Fulton would be a candidate for the nomination two years from now, I don't know. We're going to have a candidate against Brock that can defeat him.

J.B.: Would Fulton in your opinion be able to defeat him if he ran?

McWherter: Yes, he would be a very . . . Dick Fulton would be a good candidate for anything that he runs for. There's speculation that I may run again.

J.B.: Are you interested in running?

McWherter: There's media speculation in Tennessee that I'll probably run against Brock. Let me say this, we are going to have a good candidate against Brock.

J.B.: If you don't run against Brock, would you likely run for governor in four years?

McWherter: I believe that I will be re-elected speaker for the next two years and the options are many then. Our secretary of state's office will be coming up, Brock's race, the senate race, will be coming up and then two years from that, the next governor's race will be coming up. I'll make a decision in the next two years to either run for a statewide office or decide to just stay in the legislature. My business might keep me from . . . if my business situation would work out where I could leave it and go into public service on a full time basis, I would be interested in

making a statewide race. If they don't materialize in that manner, it might keep me from doing it.

J.B.: If you had a choice now, would you rather be governor or senator?

McWherter: That would be a hard choice. I think that we've got, personally, the only reason that I'm in political office today and I guess that it's because of what many politicians say, I honestly want to offer some public service and be of some public service, because I can live comfortably without it. And I guess that where more public service is needed today is in Washington than in Nashville. I'd say that I would probably prefer to be in the Senate over the governor's office. However, I feel more knowledgeable about state government than I do federal government.

J.B.: How do you assess Winfield Dunn as governor?

McWherter: I assess Winfield Dunn as a man that came along at a time that John J. Hooker was in trouble from a business standpoint. He had enjoyed the affluency that come from being a successful businessman and at the time that he was running for governor he was enduring the heartache that comes along with being in a business that's going down and going into bankruptcy. Dunn came along and . . . Winfield Dunn is very inspiring and he has much charisma and he portrays himself as a man that people want to cling to and like. He's popular. And I would say that Winfield Dunn has no knowledge of state government. Since he's got elected governor, he's got a great ability to identify the problems, but has no ability to implement solutions to the problem. (interference on tape. Portion inaudible) . . . he spent a lot of money, but he really hasn't been able to get his programs of implementation off the ground. For example, three years ago we appropriated

money for penal reform. He's had trouble in Morristown, but in Memphis, they gave the land for it and we still don't have a prison built there, which we should be using and occupying now. He hasn't been able to implement the program. In his administration, we've doubled the mental health budget, because of the need, but they haven't been able to implement and build the mental health centers that we've got money appropriated for.

J.B.: How much of the problem has been his staff and how much of it has been him?

McWherter: I think that he's got some good commissioners and he's got some bad ones, but it's all a reflection on the governor's office, when you go from a billion, one budget in four years, to two billion, two budget and you don't implement programs.

J.B.: If you were governor and faced with a Republican controlled legislature by the same narrow margin that the Democrats now control, how would you deal with that situation from what he did?

McWherter: I'd follow the pattern that's just been set by the new Republican president, Gerald Ford. I'd go to them and in my own way, my old self, so to speak, just like I was when I was among them, and sit down and talk to them about the problems that the state has got, or the nation has got in his example, and ask them to help me.

J.B.: Did Dunn fail to do that?

McWherter: Well, I don't recall Governor Dunn coming up and . . . well, I've had a very cordial relationship with the governor, I just disagree with him on many things and he's

J.B.: And his record of getting overridden on vetoes must have set some sort of maybe national record. Is that likely to weaken the office of governor

in the future?

McWherter: It could. I regret that we had to make all those overrides. I don't personally like to override a veto, but it was important this time that we did. I think . . . I don't think that it's any real reflection on Governor Dunn. It was the lack of experience on his part. His public service. After all, he came out of a dentist's chair into the governor's chair and I just believe today, that people in their elected office should have some experience, just like you do in business. You've got to have some experience in business if you are going to be a successful administrator and you need it too in government service. You see, I think what's happened, is that the Democrats now are realizing that they've got to get back together, because we've had . . . we've got Bill Brock in the Senate and I can't think of one thing that Bill Brock has done for the people of Tennessee that he represents. Not one real total Tennessean type thing. And we've got Howard Baker. I believe that Howard Baker enjoys a more grass roots support in Tennessee than Brock or Dunn. All across the state. We are going to be following the pattern that Kentucky did a few years ago, you know, our neighboring state. You know, Governor Ford told me the other night when we were together, that we are in the same shape Kentucky was in. They had a governor Dunn, and he won and they had two United States Senators and now they've got Dee Huddleston and now Governor Ford is running for the Senate against Marlowe Cook. And I think that Kentucky has done what Tennessee will do. I think that we are again the party of grass roots Tennessee. If we offer the right candidates, we will be in office.

(tape turned off)

McWherter: and it's a speech that I think he's trying to make without saying anything about Watergate. He makes it on the Constitution

and it's a hell of a thing. It starts out, "We, the people," and then he starts talking about "We, the people . . . in order to form a more perfect union." And you know, when you say "people" and when you say "union" that doesn't say anything about Negro or white or man or woman or Indian, you know. I believe that maybe these people back then, and the more I read and the more I study, the more I wish that I had a better education, but I believe that people back then, they had more in their field than we had somewhere in the period from after the Civil War up until some years ago . . . what I'm saying is that I recognize the need of the blacks and some of the underprivileged people a lot more since I got in public service than I did when I was in their position, in other words, being an underprivileged person and having to work at the shoe factory on a machine and my daddy worked for Roosevelt's recovery act . . . WPA, whatever it was

J.B.: WPA.

McWherter: And you know, he walked five miles from out there in the country down here to get his shovel and lean on his handle as they used to say. But you know, I was raised in that and I don't believe that I recognized the problems being in it, but I think that since I have come up through the other way, maybe, and got to where I did make a respectable living and have some money in the bank, and then going from there to public service, I see more of me than I did when I was among them. When I was in that elevation

J.B.: How much of a role have the black legislators played in terms of educating white legislators in Tennessee towards the needs of black people?

McWherter: Oh, I think that they have played an important role. I

think that I sit down and talk to our black legislators when they have a meeting in a caucus and come into my office in the capitol and we sit down and really talk about their needs. And we talk about housing and we talk about the food stamp programs and all those things and let me say this, the blacks don't ask . . . for example, in food stamps, they didn't ask for more food stamps or more dollars. Their concern is to make the food stamps available to the people that need them and get to those people that need them. Sometimes, folks get to the food stamp line that really don't need them so badly, but there are folks out in that community that really need them and they aren't getting to them. Now, that's a concern that I think a lot of black people have and I think that there's justification there to be concerned about. Also housing. I don't think that in the affluent society that we enjoy in Tennessee, progress and growth, honestly, I don't believe that we should have people living in one room with twelve kids. I believe that we can beat that in our state. And we are going to make a real effort as long as I am in public service in a leadership position, to try to do something about it. And we passed a housing bill in the legislature that we hoped the governor would implement and he hasn't been able to implement it, but we are going to in the next two to four years.

J.B.: Tell me about the kindergarten program in Tennessee? Is this Dunn's program or is it not Dunn's program?

McWherter: Well, of course, we appropriated the money for the program. Dunn asked for . . . first of all, when Governor Dunn came into office, he asked for a 1% sales tax increase and we wouldn't give it to him because we felt that he didn't have the knowledge of state government to ask such a request and we held it to a ½ cent because we didn't need

an additional tax increase. He wanted to implement a kindergarten program the first year, which would cost about 17 million dollars. And I would have supported it, but the schools, the county systems told me that they weren't in a position to implement it over a period of one year. They needed to phase it in over a period of three to four years. So, we did not pass his kindergarten program for the one year. Instead, we passed a phase in of four years and by the time that he goes out of office, his kindergarten program will be totally implemented. But that's an example, I think, of where the governor just didn't have experience in state government to know about the tax request and also to realize that he couldn't implement a program overnight.

(tape turned off)

J.B.: . . . labor's influence growing in Tennessee politics.

McWherter: Organized labor's influence in Tennessee politics is very important. Organized labor and political involvement in Tennessee, they don't try to exert themselves. I think that organized labor is an important factor in Tennessee and I think that they have proven that they just want better government and they want a better standard of living for their people.

J.B.: Do they contribute financially?

McWherter: Yes, they contribute financially, but they contribute, I would say, as individuals more than they do financially . . . (static noises, tape inaudible)

J.B.: . . . organized volunteers?

McWherter: Yes . . . (static noise, tape inaudible) . . . the communication workers for the last two years have manned all of our television telethon programs in Tennessee. And I think that organized labor wants two things. I think that they want to be in the process and they want an improved

standard of living for their membership and for all Tennesseans.

J.B.: I've tried to analyze what really constitutes the basis of the Democratic party in Tennessee, what sort of coalitions. You've got basically black, organized labor tends to be Democratic, certainly at the leadership level, is it at the rank and file . . . has the emotion calmed down over issues of four and five years ago?

McWherter: I don't see organized labor now as being emotional. I think organized labor represents a steady stream of middle Tennessee. I think that there is certainly a place for them, but organized labor doesn't come into us with great demands, they just want, they want to make what contributions they can to increase the standard of living for themselves and for all Tennesseans. They work shoulder to shoulder with us and I'm proud to be recognized among them, really.

J.B.: What other groups fit into

McWherter: We don't have any violent strike situations in Tennessee. You know, you haven't read of any in the past few years.

J.B.: How about the top levels of the business community. Do they tend to be Republican?

McWherter: The top level of the business community do tend to be Republican now and all over the state. Frank Clement, again, enjoys the support of the top business people in Tennessee and the top banking industry presidents and those things. I think that we are in a position now of realigning ourselves with those folks. I enjoy the personal friendship of the top business community in Tennessee myself and it's a very enjoyable relationship. Just like I enjoy the friendship of the labor movement

J.B.: If you ran for statewide office, would you be able to get

support from those groups?

McWherter: Very definitely. I have been offered support from those groups. And not just financially in the way of help.

J.B.: Is their major interest in the growth and moderation of the state?

McWherter: Some of our top industrialists in Tennessee, and I'm going to say that I could mention three or four . . . Jack Massey of Nashville, which is one of our top industrial people, and Ingram, which has been recognized as a national Republican . . . they are my friends and you know . . . Billy Mitchell is in the First National Corporation in Memphis and you've got Andrew Benedict in the First American Corporation in Nashville banks, some of those folks, I think, are Independents and you've got fellows like Bill Earthman that is my friend, chairman of the Tennessee

Corp, the holding company of the Commerce Union Bank system . . . Earthman has been a long time standing Republican. He's a friend of mine, but he's a Republican. As I'm a Democrat and I respect him as such, but some of these other people are Independent people that the right candidates of the Democratic party can regain their confidence and alliances.

(tape turned off)

(end of interview)