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This is an interview with Mr. Bennett Johnston, State Senator from Louisiana. The interview was conducted by Jack Bass and Walter DeVries on January 30, 1974. Susan Hathaway transcribed the interview.

JACK BASS: Where do you see politics going in Louisiana? I mean, in the sense that the '72 Governors race seems to reflect to some extent a turning point. Would you agree to that? I mean, from the standpoint that here were all the old familiar faces that got wiped out and the top four people in the Governors race all got elected to high office; you to the Senate, David Treen to Congress, Gillis Long to Congress and Edwin Edwards to the Governor's office. What is the significance of all of that?

Bennett Johnston: Well, you can explain a great deal of it in just national trends. First of all, the style politician that Louisiana was noted for in past years is hardly possible in the media era. The Earl Long, for example, who depended on the personal contact, the stump speech, etc., is just not the thing for the media age where you must come across on television. That change, I think, was reflected in the '72 race. Secondly, the

black vote, of course; it was so significant that that in turn determined success or lack of it and determined the style of campaign and the orientation of the candidate. Then third, I think, is the general feeling in the country, as well as Louisiana, to go to the new look, the young candidate. When you look at the number of young candidates around the country coming up who represent not just youth but modern thought, the "New South" etc., then I think it is also an expression of that. Finally, in Louisiana, it was the natural evolution from getting away from the bi-politics of Long and anti-Long and the final stage of that. Then you can explain much of it in terms of just the personalities involved, as far as that race is concerned, and you look at each one and explain what happened to them in terms of his own personality, age, politics, record, etc.

Walter DeVries: Was it the end of the Long era? The end of the Long influence in Louisiana politics?

Johnston: I think that it is pretty clear that there is no longer a Long, anti-Long in Louisiana and the name Long gets very few of the votes and loses a few votes I would say now. Those who really remember the old Long regime and what it stood for are so few in number that they are pretty well gone, and there is no one really who carries the torch of Longism and what it stood for. I mean, you've

got some with the Long name, but Russell hardly represents the Sharing the Wealth Program anymore. Long, anti-Long has been fading ever since Earl Long's last term anyway. Each year that goes by he gets further away from it.

W.D.: Some say that your loss to Edwards was kind of a shifting of the power from the North to the South. That in the past most of the Governors, all of the Governors recently have come from the northern part of the state. Do you read that election that way?

Johnston: Not really. I think that the fact that Governors had come from the north was more of a coincidence anyway. I don't think that the north had the political power necessarily. When you say the South, if that means everything from Alexandria down, then you are talking about a vast region in terms of political preferences and in terms of culture. The Florida parishes are as much north Louisiana as north Louisiana, perhaps even more. Half the people in *north*, maybe a little over half in that area are north Louisiana oriented. That is to say, Wasp or Redneck oriented as opposed to those in the French triangle. One thing that it was definitely not, was the shifting of power to the French triangle. I would say that the dominance of north Louisiana in terms of it happening that many more times, that people are going to come from north of Alexandria, I think that

was bound to fade anyway just by the law of averages. I just don't see the succession of Governors in north Louisiana being because of the power in north Louisiana, as much as it was a chance. I think you could have just as well had a Governor from the Florida parishes or another Sam Jones, who would be equally as acceptable in north Louisiana.

W.D.: It wasn't a diminution of anti-Catholicism?

Johnston: Oh, I think, perhaps to some extent, yes. But when you look at that election, you had a tremendous turn-out in south Louisiana and the relatively low turn-out in north Louisiana. Of the ten top parishes in turn-out, Edwards got eight. Of the ten lowest parishes in turn-out, I got eight. I got 38 of the 26 parishes [sic]. The black vote made a tremendous difference. We figured that I got about 57% of the white vote and Edwards got about 43%, something on that order. He got about 80% of the black vote. So, if you had the same black registration, which you had four years earlier, or eight years earlier, we would have won quite easily. Now, the fact that the black vote has come on changes the political picture, but it doesn't necessarily change the preference for Catholic or non-Catholic. It is not just a question of religion, it is a question of culture and all that that represents. There is, unfortunately, remaining prejudices by both Catholics

and by non-Catholics toward the people in the other camp. But there is also, aside from the religion, just a difference in the life style, of the governmental preferences, and of the ideology in the areas that created the prejudices as well.

J.B.: We had one academic observer from Louisiana tell us that Louisiana, despite the outcome of the election, reflects the same developing base of urban Republicanism as the rest of the South and in his words he said that if a Bennett Johnston should switch to the Republican party it would be the turning point. I wonder if you would comment on that both from a personal point of view as well as an impersonal point of view.

Johnston: Well, there is a . . . I mean, you've got a couple or three questions in there. First of all, whether I would be the catalyst that would mark the change, I really wouldn't be in a position to comment on that, but on the question of how far away is Louisiana from Republicanism, I would say that you've got a few factors in Louisiana which inhibit that. First of all, monetary, in light of a bunch of Republicans to lead the charge--some, yes. But not a great large reservoir and they really, I don't think, have been that intent on increasing their numbers because most of them like it as it is and they control the patronage, 2½%

of the voters control it. Secondly, we have an unusually large number of blacks who moderate the effect of the conservatism which the Republicans are supposed to represent. Mississippi has those too and it has made some progress, but we have more than Texas, or more than North Carolina or some of these states that are getting more of a viable two party system. Now that can also help to polarize things as well. But I would say that it could happen under the right circumstances. I don't expect it to happen anytime soon. If the Democratic party did some foolish things, or some of us in office did some foolish things to get too far away from the mainstream of our states, then I expect that you might see that kind of movement, but I don't expect, at least we'll all try to not get too far out of step.

J.B.: In which direction do you see the Democratic party moving at this time?

Johnston: Well, back towards the center from McGovern. But it depends on the time frame that you put it in. If you put it in more of a long term basis, it certainly . . . well, I would say that over the long term the whole nation is going more liberal. The Democrats and the Republicans, thirty years ago, were not talking about Civil Rights Bills and both of them are now. So if you want to put it in terms of, both parties are liberalizing on Civil Rights and have been for a long time. If you want to talk about economics, I think

both parties are also doing that. Relative to the Republican party, I wouldn't want to say what we are doing this year as opposed to last year. I think we will have to wait and see who the nominee is to lead the party because it just depends on what part of the party you are talking about.

J.B.: But you have sort of left open that there could be conditions under which you conceivably could switch?

Johnston: Oh, you are talking about me switching. No, I don't plan to switch. I don't consider that a viable alternative at all. That is why I should point out first of all that I could . . . whether given the fact that I could switch I wouldn't want to comment on that.

J.B.: You are saying that you wouldn't want to comment on that because it is something that you would consider?

Johnston: That's right.

J.B.: But that is not just in the picture at all?

Johnston: Well, the switching is not in the picture, and whether I could leave would call for a personal evaluation.

End interview with Bennett Johnson.