

EDITORIAL

PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO KNOW

There has been a muchrooming trend in recent years toward "creeping secrecy" in government—a feeling of public official that the voters have no right to watch, and therefore judge, the official acts of the men they elect to office.

Public apathy has made it possible for public "servants" to close their meeting doors to the taxpayers, and to deny them the use of public records. In many Texas counties now it is impossible to determine whether the public treasury is being bled into private pockets, or the county governmental machinery is being allowed to fall into disrepair. The citizen can't attend the "executive sessions" of his commissioners court and school board, and he is met with a grumbling assent or even an outright refusal when he asks to look at county records.

This condition certainly doesn't apply to all Texas counties—but in at least three, one or more county officers has been indicted for criminal misconduct of office during the past year. Just as dangerous as the possibility of crookedness in office, however, is the idea that exists in the minds of such public officials that the public should not know how its business is carried on.

This exaggerated bureaucratic "need" of privacy does not tend to stagnate. It tends to grow. Unless it is stamped out at the local level with deliberate care, it tends to spread from a small flame in the brush into a roaring prairie fire.

There now are in the legislative hopper at Austin five bills which we consider to be particularly effective roadblocks to the runaway limousine of bureaucratic secrecy. These bills also have the enthusiastic support of Attorney General John Ben Shepperd, who declares that if they had been on the statutes a few years before, there could have been no Duval County, where, he says, it was worth a citizen's life to ask for an audit of county records, or challenge an official's use of public funds.

These bills are:

1. HB 12, to require publication of the proceedings of the commissioners courts.
2. HB 13, requiring publication of annual financial statements for school, road, soil conservation and other districts.
3. HB 18, requiring immediate payment for the printing of citations in delinquent tax suits and proceedings for the sale of property to satisfy judgements in favor of governmental bodies.
4. HB 29, requiring publication of the full text of city ordinances.
5. HB 148, making changes in the mandatory publications act to fix responsibility for causing publications to be made.

If these five bills become law, it will be virtually impossible for officials to hide behind a curtain of official secrecy. The bills not only prescribe what shall be done, but provide a penalty. An office holder is subject to forfeiture of salary and removal from office if he refuses to carry out his duty of publishing records.

In theory, the trust of public office requires its holders to conduct their duties openly. These bills make it certain that they do.

Highlights and Sidelights FROM Your State CAPITOL

Austin is full of "land-grab" investigations.

Attorney General John Ben Shepperd blew the lid off veterans' land sales to start the movement and the lid is still sailing.

Both houses of the legislature have their own investigating committees. Also peering into the "land block sale" scandals are grand juries in Travis and DeWitt counties.

Voting to conduct a full investigation, the House set up a committee composed of Representatives Joe Burkett, Wade F. Spilman, Virginia Duff, Reagan R. Huffman and Jesse Osborn. Burkett is chairman; Spilman vice-chairman.

Recalled by the Senate investigating committee, headed by Sen. Dorsey B. Hardeman, was Attorney General Shepperd, for testimony under oath. This at the request of Sen. Jimmy Phillips.

Because of Phillips' line of questioning, Rep. Leroy Saul charged that the senator was preparing to run for attorney general and using the investigation for "personal publicity."

Shepperd testified that minutes of the Veterans' Land Board showing him present and voting for individual applications were erroneous. He said that the board didn't pass on the applications... that it was an administrative matter turned over to the chairman—former Land Commissioner Bascorn Giles.

The same practice is being followed under the new chairman, J. Earl Rudder, Shepperd said.

Shepperd also said he didn't use his influence as a board member to get favors for any applicants. He further stated that a 1953 letter from G. Curtis Jackson, Jr., Zavala County attorney, complaining of block land deals by C. O. Hagan, was not seen by him until after the investigation started.

Shepperd Files Suits
This testimony came as Shepperd filed the first two of a prospective long list of suits to forfeit block land deals and re-

cover the money paid land operators.

G. Curtis Jackson, Jr., was a defendant named in one of the suits. Shepperd testified that Jackson was identified in one of the land deals.

Shepperd's first two suits were against L. V. Ruffia and B. R. Sheffield, both of Brady and J. Paul Little, G. Curtis Jackson, Jr., and H. R. Stallings, of Crystal City. The Brady group was sued for \$336,247; the latter for \$150,000.

Sheffield has been identified as a former business associate of Bascom Giles, who quit as land commissioner and veterans' land board chairman on Jan. 1. Giles refused to testify before the Senate committee on his business relations with Sheffield and other land operators.

Rep. Dolph Briscoe, Jr., author of the House investigation measure, also introduced a bill providing 10-year prison terms and \$10,000 fines for using deceit, fraud or duress on veterans, or false or forged documents in land deals.

Insurance Committee Action
Corrective insurance bills have run into a slow-down.

Four were heard by a House Committee including one to regulate insurance company securities. All were sent to a subcommittee for two weeks.

In the Senate the insurance committee heard two bills. One would fix a \$375,000 minimum capital and surplus for new legal reserve life companies, all in cash. One requires examinations of legal reserve life agents. Both were attacked as monopolistic—for the big companies and were sent to sub-committees.

Labor Bills
Legislative committees moved slowly on a mass of other bills awaiting their action.

Several labor bills were heard. One by Sen. George Parkhouse, dealing with "the Port Arthur situation," won favorable action. It would permit picketing only by employees representing a majority of the workers of a struck firm.

Another bill by Parkhouse would prevent rickets from interfering with common carrier service to a struck plant; and would fine or jail common carrier employees for refusing to cross a picket line.

Water Committees Busy

Two committees studied water legislation.

Rep. Harold Parish's constitutional amendment for a \$200 million bond issue and a 1-cent property tax, was received by the constitutional amendments committee, and held over for action.

Sen. Dorsey B. Hardeman's constitutional amendment for a \$100 million bond issue and a 3-cent tax is awaiting committee action.

Another House committee heard arguments on a bill for setting up a water commission. In the Senate, two rival plans by Senator Hardeman, who was chairman of the water resources study committee, and Sen. Crawford Martin, call for a water commission—one appointive, the other elective. All three would abolish the present Board of Water Engineers.

Miscellaneous
Attorney General Shepperd convened his fifth annual law enforcement conference in Austin with David Brian, "Mr. District Attorney" of TV, as a featured speaker.

A new drive for more stringent prohibition laws, including the possibility of an attempted constitutional amendment for something like the old prohibition law, is talked. Conference here by the Texas Council of Churches and the Council of Methodist Women may be the springboard.

Legislators are studying an A&M College report that Texas farm population has slumped 47.9 per cent since 1940—as compared with a 28.3 per cent decline for the rest of the nation.

In 1954 the farm population was an estimated 1,126,000. That's 261,000 less than in 1950 and 1,297,000 under the record year of 1954.

Farms have increased in size to 517 acres average, or twice that of 1930.

Mr. and Mrs. R. L. Elliott, Jr., and boys of Dalhart visited relatives here this weekend. Mr. and Mrs. R. L. Elliott, Sr., returned home with them for an extended visit.

Mrs. Tod Newton visited her husband, who is stationed at the Naval Air Base in Corpus Christi, a few days last week.

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New Game Birds To Be Released

The first consignment of red-legged partridges—a species that thrived in Spain under conditions resembling parts of West Texas—is being kept in holding pens preliminary to release south of Childress.

This announcement was made by W. S. Jennings, Assistant Director of Wildlife Restoration for the Game and Fish Commission, which is trying to find upland game species adaptable to different parts of far-flung Texas for stocking experiments.

Recently, the Commission also took first steps to obtain sage hens, which abound in some Western States, to release in the Big Bend Country.

The red-legged partridges, which will be introduced to the Paducah area south of Childress, were obtained with the aid of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

An earlier shipment of the game birds had to be destroyed in quarantine because they had not been inoculated against Newcastle's disease. The latest consignment, numbering 70 birds, was properly treated and

promptly cleared by custom authorities. Another shipment is expected shortly.

The Assistant Director of Wildlife Restoration said red-legged partridges require little water and can stand extreme temperatures. They feed on weed seed, leaves, grain and insects.

He described the bird as being about twice the size of bobwhite quail and as being distinctively marked. The basic color is a deep rich brown, blended with lighter hues around the neck. The head is marked with a mixture of brown and tan.

Mrs. J. T. Loper visited Mrs. Benny Pierson and family in Beville and also another daughter and family in Corpus Christi, a few days last week.

Tod Newton of Corpus Christi spent last weekend with his wife and Mr. and Mrs. N. L. Dickey and family.

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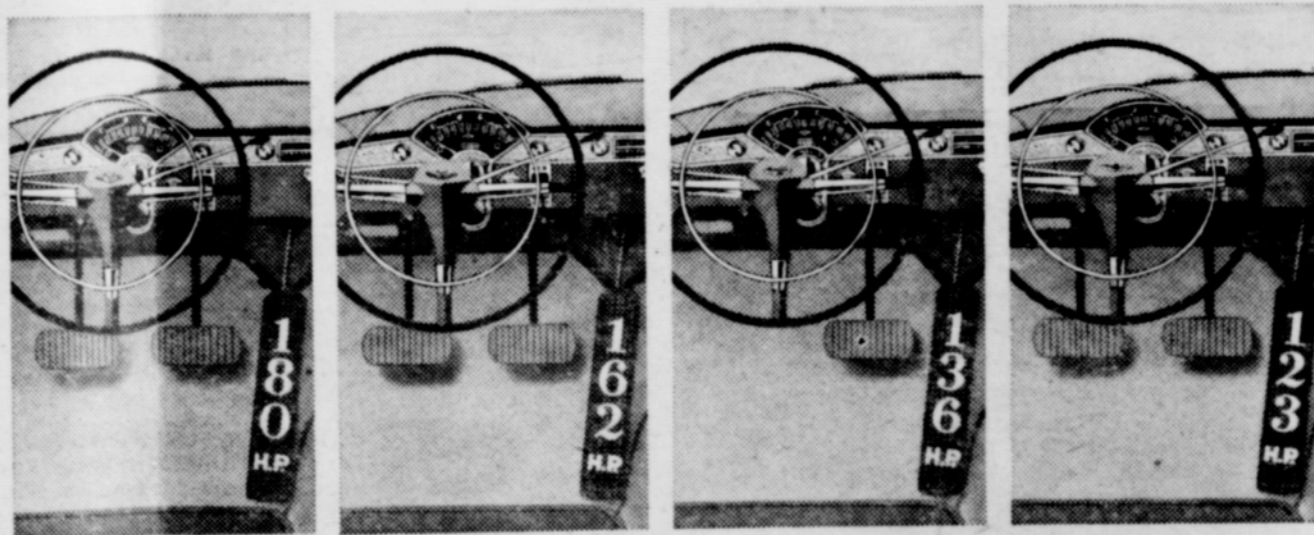
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