McClure's time for Idaho limited

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: Recently retired executive editor and political columnist of The Post-Register, Ben J. Plastino, will continue to write a column periodically to appear on this page.)

By BEN J. PLASTINO

Idahoans must be concerned about how thin Sen. James A. McClure is spreading himself over the political spectrum in Washington.

His penchant for involving himself in so many issues and activities may mean that he will neglect Idaho affairs in favor of national issues.

It was a problem Sen. Frank Church constantly faced in his later years as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as a power in the upper chamber before he was unseated in 1980. In fact, it was one of many factors contributing to his defeat.

McClure attempts to serve his Idaho constituents, but a recent story indicated that with his increased influence has come a corresponding expansion of responsibilities and demands on his time.

Idaho people going to Washington find it difficult to get an audience with McClure because of his pressing duties, whereas they find that other members of the Idaho congressional delegation shoulder most of the greeting chores.

There was a time, for example, when McClure would ask Idaho political writers for an interview, coming frequently to their offices. He has now generally discarded that practice with rare exceptions. His scheduled press conferences have become largely institutionalized. They lack the warm feelings that should exist between a senator and Idaho newsmen. As a result there is shallower coverage.

McClure had to delay a decision on important Idaho wilderness legislation from this fall to next year, a timetable he himself set, obviously because he did not have time to give it proper attention.

Another trend that probably further insulates McClure from the public is his staff, which may find less inclinaton to talk to reporters. McClure's two public relations people, Bill Livingstone and H. D. Palmer, have done an excellent job. But it is noteworthy that they are giving less time to Idaho newsmen because of demand on their time from the national news media. This disturbing trend could accelerate in the future.

Observation

Steve Forrester, The Post-Register correspondent and columnist in Washington, touched on these very points in recent articles. Forrester appears more akin to Oregon and Washington interests than Idaho, but in one article, he stated flatly that McClure lacks influence among his peers.

Forrester noted rightfully that Church and Idaho's other senator at that time, Len B. Jordan, were an especially potent combination because both served on the Senate Interior Committe, now the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

As a standing principle, they decided that nothing would happen in Idaho without their agreement — be it wilderness, reclamation, agriculture, public range or any other program. They frequently put party matters aside for what they could achieve for Idaho.

When McClure succeeded Jordan, that changed. There was some cooperation between McClure and Church on Idaho matters but not much.

Forrester stated flatly that Idaho's congressional delegation in the Northwest is the least effective, and not simply because it is the smallest. He says that's because all four of the Idaho Republicans largely support the vested interest and in varying ways serve as obstructionists.

Forrester says McClure is regarded as an intelligent and articulate senator, but he has not distinguished himself among the Republican committee chairmen. Forrester blames that to McClure's obsession with details, thus forsaking broad leadership.

Leadership

Yet, McClure appears to have the inside track for the prestigious Senate majority leadership to replace the retiring Sen. Howard Baker, of Tennessee. That's because he has the broadest conservative power base in the Senate.

If McClure wins that position, he will out of necessity be even more inaccessible to his Idaho constituents by turning more and more of his attention to national affairs.

McClure apparently faces only token opposition in his bid for reelection from Idaho in 1984. No formidable Democrat has indicated a desire to oppose him. As a result, a newcomer, Pete Busch, Lewiston realtor and former Marine pilot, appears at this point to be the only opponent.

Yet, it may be surprising at the number of votes Busch will receive. It would indicate opposition to McClure rather than a vote in behalf of Busch.

It appears the Republicans may retain control of the Senate, unless there is an unforeseen debacle with the Reagan Administration that should send many Republican senators spinning to defeat. There will be 19 Republican senators up for reelection compared to only 14 Democrats. Most of the Democrats are from the deep South and are considered safe.

Busy

Because of his many duties, McClure is late to many committee meetings, press conferences and appointments. For example, McClure said he spent only three weekends at his Arlington, Va., home during the early part of the year.

McClure is a soft spoken legislator who rarely evokes deep antagonism, even from those who vigorously oppose his pro-development policies of natural resources. At present he holds the No. 3 position in the Senate as majority caucus chairman. He was elected to this high post in January 1981.

McClure expanded and diversified the communications division to provide print, radio and television news services to some 25,000 editors and broadasters nationwide. These started out on a strong positions in 1981 and continued in 1982 but they petered out the past year.

He presides over the caucus of 55 Republian senators which became the majority party for the first time in 28 years.

He views Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens, the Republican whip, as his foremost rival for the majority position, although there are a number of other prominent senators in contention.

Besides being chairman of the majority caucus and Energy and Natural Resources Committee, he also chairs the interior subcommittee of the Senate Appropriation Committee and is a member of the Senate Rules Committees. He is co-founder, member and past chairman of the Senate Steering Committeee.

Idaho product

The 58-year old McClure is a true Idaho product. He was born, raised and practice law in Payette. He received his law degree from the University of Idaho and served three terms in the Idaho Senate before being elected to the House in 1965. When Sen. Henry Dworshak retired, McClure was elected to the U.S. Sen ate in 1972, defeating Democrat William E. Davis , then Idaho State University president and now chancellor at the University of Oregon.

McClure's easy re-election victories since may come back to haunt him in future elections, if a formidable Democratic party opponent were to surface.