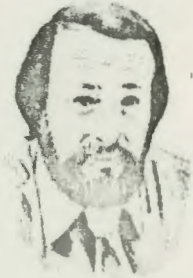


Tom McCall still a feisty political animal

By HENNY WILLIS
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In any season, a visit with Tom McCall is a delight. In a political season, it's a special bonus.

Still colorful, still candid, still a bit cantankerous, the ex-governor always brings a unique zest to conversation. As opinionated as ever, and as ready (even eager) to share those opinions, McCall looks fit and sounds combative — a sure sign that he's chafing a bit on the political sidelines.



He came to Eugene one day last week to speak at a League of Women Voters membership meeting. It takes a special invitation, or a special subject, to lure McCall into the rigors of speech-making and extensive travel these days. The League constituted the special invitation, because McCall has always had a warm spot for the hard-working ladies who have, more often than not, supported his positions on past public issues. And, the subject the League asked him to talk about — land-use planning — is a favorite McCall topic these days — especially in the face of a real threat to repeal the state's land-use laws, which McCall helped push into the statute books.

Overall, McCall's speech was a bit rambling and not as crisp as in the gubernatorial days when staff members could rough out speech drafts for him. And, it wasn't as punchy and pithy as League members and guests in the overflow crowd expected. But, it still contained the essential personality of Tom McCall.

The eloquence of old remains intact, illustrated by such phrases as "... wise nibbling on tomorrow" or "... extracting the last pinch of stink" or "... places where nature is wearing a little thin." And, he can still ram home a pertinent point with vigor and directness, as when he criticized "the exploiters who don't give a damn about tomorrow as long as they can wallow in their wealth of today."

The feisty McCall emerged at the end of a question-and-answer session. An elderly man boldly came to the microphone and challenged McCall's support for land-use planning. The ex-governor handled the incident nicely until his patience ran dry. The old gent kept trying to shove some pro-repeal literature into McCall's hands, when, ultimately, the master of the crafted phrase blurted out: "I've seen all that crap." It was spontaneous and brought big applause from the crowd.

Afterward, McCall settled down with about a dozen reporters for an informal press conference. Always at ease with the Fourth Estate, he seemed to enjoy

himself as the questions poured forth.

To the big question — will he run for governor in two years — McCall genuinely seems torn. His comments indicate he's not altogether happy with Bob Straub's performance and that he does miss the job. But, the pragmatic politician surfaces, too.

"You want your successor to succeed," he said. "The pressure (for him to run) has been tremendous, but I'm saying let's give Straub a chance. Also, there's the old question of should you try to repaint a good picture? To me, Straub's record is spotty, but he hasn't got a good solid team together yet. I was no genius, but I had a great team. I hope he hacks it and I don't feel the pressure to run. But, I do miss it terribly."

Over the past year and a half, McCall has been generally quiet about the performance of his Democratic successor. He's tried to avoid, in his words, "standing on the sidelines and carping." But, Tom McCall is — if nothing else — a candid man. The question was straightforward: On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you rate Straub as governor?

"I'd put him at about 4½," McCall responded. "But, I probably wouldn't put myself any higher. His handling of people has been a real problem. Something's wrong with the intercommunication in there and he's guillotining

good people like L. B. Day and Lon Topaz and Cleighton Penwell and Amos Reed. I guess my personal feelings for those people (most of whom McCall brought into state government) colors my evaluation, but Straub is bouncing a lot of good people.

"And, his communications with the agency people seems uneven. Seven hours after I was inaugurated, I met with all the agency heads. Straub took seven months to do that. But, I don't mean to be bubbling with criticism. His trip up the coast was a gallant effort and some of the things he's doing are good."

The consensus in political circles is that if McCall runs for governor in 1978, it'll be as an independent. For one thing, there's a strong feeling that the liberal McCall couldn't win a Republican primary against the more conservative Vic Atiyeh (who's already gearing up for another try at the governorship). Atiyeh's huge victory two years ago in the GOP gubernatorial primary over the more liberal (and better known) Clay Myers showed the state's GOP to be relatively conservative.

For another thing, during his governorship McCall was allied with Democrats far more often than with his own party, so his appeal is potentially quite broad.

A three-way race between Straub, McCall and Atiyeh would be wild. But, McCall is a lifelong Republican and the tradition is deep. "Oregon is the last refuge of what Republicanism ought to be," he says, somewhat sadly.

So, what's his view of the Ford-Carter race?

"I don't really know at this point who I'll vote for," he said. "My favorite — Mo Udall — always ran second. I'd jump the Grand Canyon for him. I'm very fond of Ford, a wonderful guy. But, he's 75 to 1 behind Carter on the environment. That's one issue the President just doesn't understand. Carter and I got along well when we were both governors and he's so good on the environment. I'd rate Ford the slight favorite now, although he kicked the progressives in the teeth by choosing Dole. I just don't know."

Despite McCall's affinity for the GOP candidate and his affection for Ford, it appears that deep down McCall feels Carter would be more open to innovation and change.

"If Ford loses," McCall said, "then I think the Third Force movement (McCall's loose concept of a progressive independent political force) can challenge the Carter team on some things and get the best from both sides."

Overall, Tom McCall is as feisty as ever, apparently brimming with good health and his characteristic good humor. He misses being governor, but is genuinely unsure about whether he wants to jump into a major political race again, at the age of 65 in two years. But, as one observer during his League speech last Wednesday said, "He sounds more like a candidate than an elder statesman."

True enough.