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"City Hall Contrasts"

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Good editorial: proper observation
1st Amend. representative

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Thursday, December 22, 1977

City Hall Contrasts

MAYOR WYETH CHANDLER has been spared the kind of outrage that has followed the cynicism and arrogance of Shelby County Mayor Roy Nixon and Gov. Ray Blanton. The flak aimed at City Hall might have been more intense in a less turbulent week.

But there has been a mess uncovered in the city's Public Works Department. Director Frank Palumbo has gone into self-exile with speculation that he will not return to the job. Questions of conflict of interest, misuse of public funds in contract work, and general mismanagement have been raised. Inquiry into possible criminal actions is being conducted by the federal grand jury and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

With walls cracking around him, Chandler has borne up well. He appears to have dealt forthrightly with the problems that have come to his attention.

Certainly he cannot be accused of "stonewalling," as the governor has done in his pronouncement that he will respond only to "positive" questions.

Chandler has not been seized by a fit of big-heartedness that might cause him to issue blanket pardons.

He has not tried to sweep the issue under the rug.

And especially he has not tried to insult the intelligence of the taxpaying public with a lot of blather about persecution.

THIS STRAIGHTFORWARD conduct in a stressful and sticky situation is commendable. The contrast with behavior across the way in the county offices and in the governor's office in Nashville is refreshing.

But it must be observed that everything Chandler has done to right the Public Works wrongs has been done in reaction to outside inquiry. He's been trying to tighten the ship before FBI investigations churn up the sea.

At least they have not been defensive-type reactions.

Chandler undoubtedly now has learned the folly of delegating authority without following up on performance.

City government is a big, complex and expensive operation and a mayor has to have capable, strong directors as managers. But the mayor has to audit them. There must be checks and balances.

Chandler's ad hoc group which already is running its own check of seamy practices that have been going on for years has pointed up the need for safeguards. The City Council's plan for its own inquiry, apparently intended to parallel the mayor's mainly for a show of concern and unity, also seeks to find out what's missing in the system and to plug the gaps.

If these steps actually lead to stronger safeguards, that's a plus.

But Chandler also has the immediate task of showing everybody in city employment, from top to bottom, that there is no free lunch in public service.

Chandler has the reputation of being honest if sometimes inept (consider his handling of liaison with the Shelby legislative delegation), and to keep the imprint of honesty will require him to deal harshly with aides high and low who do not live up to that standard of honesty. There can be no pussyfooting or temporizing in the face of unsavory practices.

That's the mayor's challenge now.

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