

McKeldin Faces Problems

But Is Called 'Sound Gamble'

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By THOMAS O'NEILL

Governor-elect Theodore R. McKeldin faces a familiar situation when he becomes Maryland's chief executive January 10.

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Success or failure of his administration will probably hinge upon the application of equally familiar solutions to the political problems confronting the new Governor. Unless Mr. McKeldin can come up with the correct answer the prospect is for four years of confusion and stalemate at Annapolis.

"Is Sound Gamble"

On his record, the Governor-elect is a sound gamble to come out on top.

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His problem is simply stated. The Governor-elect is a Republican. The Legislature, controlling the pursestrings and exercising a veto over numbers of his appointments to public office, is heavily Democratic. In such circumstances, the tendency is for the Legislature to try to take over the executive functions while the Governor fights to retain them. Only an adroit and fortunate executive can win in such a struggle.

Satisfaction Indicated

Once before, as mayor of Baltimore, Mr. McKeldin came up against the same situation. When he took office in the City Hall in May, 1943, he faced a solidly Democratic City Council. By patience and shrewdness, the Republican Mayor got from the Democratic Council virtually everything he especially wanted.

At its conclusion in 1947, his administration was accounted by impartial onlookers as having operated as satisfactorily as others in which both the executive and legislative branches were of the same political coloration. Its achievements included a new City Charter that required a great degree of skill in maneuver upon the part of the Mayor.

Then as now the Democrats were violently divided among themselves. The division offered a ready remedy for Mayor McKeldin's problems of 1943. He quickly came to terms with the faction that had the votes to control the Council's actions, paying its price with City Hall patronage. When an internal Democratic upheaval swung control to a rival group, Mr. McKeldin switched the flow of favors in accord with the new alignment. The results continued agreeable to the Mayor.

Toward the end of his administration, Mayor McKeldin applied a final test to the cupidity of his nominal political opponents and the outcome was as before. Mr. McKeldin advocated a change in the City Charter to provide additional representation in the City Council to election districts which had a considerably greater population than the average.

New Proposal Wins

The Democrats opposed this vigorously and vociferously until the Mayor made a further proposal.

He tied to his original plan a suggestion that the councilmanic salary rate be increased from \$2,500 a year to \$4,000. The hostile Council fell in line immediately, the Charter change was voted as the Mayor suggested, and was subsequently ratified by the voters and is now the basic law of the municipality.

Beyond getting the votes needed for projects in which he had a deep concern, such as the revision of the Charter and his annual budgets, Mr. McKeldin made almost no attempt to provide leadership for the City Council. He was content in most matters to make recommendations and leave further action to the Democrats. His favorite device when a program got out of hand was to change the subject and talk about something else.

This attitude and the circumstance that his administration fell during the war and immediate post-war years when construction was tightly restricted combined to limit his tenure largely to the day-by-day operation of the municipal government and to bar the initiation of major steps which were talked about but never acted upon. It may be that this will be repeated while he is at Annapolis.

Four Categories Cited

While Mr. McKeldin was at the City Hall his appointments fell regularly into four categories, some productive of excellent choices and at least one that brought regrettable results.

Ignoring political affiliations Mr. McKeldin kept career men in office at the head of the most important bureaus of the city government. His first eleven appointments of this kind embraced six Democrats and five Republicans. His first Greenbag of 53 names included 21 Democrats. The career appointments were universally successful.

A second group consisted of personal appointees, chosen by the Mayor for reasons ranging from sage to sentimental. In this class was his appointment of Simon E. Sobeloff as his city solicitor and chief adviser, an appointment the Mayor got confirmed only by breaking up a hostile coalition in the City Council. Another was his choice of Nathan L. Smith to head the Department of Public Works when the post was vacated by the death of a career engineer.

"From Good To Terrible"

In the third category were the political payoffs by which Mr. McKeldin enticed Democratic councilmen to give him their votes. These ranged from good to terrible.

Last, in Mr. McKeldin's practice, were the appointments doled to the Republican party organization. Mr. McKeldin, who recognized his electoral success as arising from his own great personal popularity rather than from any efforts of the ragged GOP organization, seldom bothered to fight for these nominees when they were challenged in the City Council. In at least one case the choice was so poor that the Mayor was soon impelled to demand a resignation. The party organization was never happy and constantly denounced the Mayor, who ignored the blasts even more completely than he did the organization leaders.

When Mr. McKeldin first needed Democratic allies in the City Council to forward his aims, he dealt with a coalition of Democratic leaders headed by James H. Pollack and the late Ambrose J. Kennedy, bringing upon himself the fire of a factional minority allied with William Curran which designated itself an economy bloc."

Power in Coalition

With the passage of time, he found that the power in the Council rested in the hands of a new coalition in which the top figures were Pollack and Curran and he steered his patronage that way. On one occasion, after waiting patiently for two years to reward a follower with a public office, he found it expedient to throw Pollack overboard and deal with Pollack's factional enemies, and that he did.

At Annapolis, Mr. McKeldin will find the Democratic majority as bitterly divided as it was in the City Council. His pressing problem in the State House, if the City Hall tactics are to be followed, is the selection of the Democratic faction with which he is to deal.

Some observers believe that in the wisdom of that choice when it is made will rest the fate of the entire administration. The present division appears to be between city and county Democrats. But McKeldin knows how unstable are Democratic factional alliances, and the picture could change abruptly.

He may be tempted, for instance, by an offer a bloc of possibly five State senators from city districts who combined with the eleven Republicans in the State Senate could guarantee confirmation of such appointments as he must submit to the upper house of the Legislature.